

HOW TEACHERS' BELIEFS ARE REFLECTED ON WHAT THEY DO IN THEIR CLASSES: A REPORT ON AN ENGLISH CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

Mayra Solís Hernández

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a classroom observation done to determine if a teacher's beliefs about the method used, control, and student initiative are reflected on her behavior in an English class at the university level. It also intends to find out if the students' beliefs about the method, the pace of learning English, and the activities that help them learn English match their teacher's beliefs.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una observación de clase realizada para determinar si las creencias de una profesora de inglés sobre el método empleado en un curso universitario, el control del grupo, y la iniciativa de los estudiantes se reflejan en su actuación en el aula. Además, se pretende comprobar si existe una relación entre las creencias de los estudiantes y las de la profesora con respecto al método, al ritmo de aprendizaje y a las actividades de clase.

Teaching English as a second language involves not only transmitting information or knowledge to learners but also helping them acquire values and attitudes which will be highly useful in the future. Teachers' beliefs play a prominent role in this process because they underlie teachers' classroom action, so they are very likely to influence the way teachers teach and what perceptions learners get from these teachers. Likewise, perceptions of certain events influence students' learning more than the events themselves.

The question of what makes a good teacher must ultimately be concerned with what and how much

students learn and what exactly that learning is for. Therefore, we can only be really effective teachers if we clearly understand that our beliefs are reflected on what we consciously or unconsciously do in our classrooms. Since these beliefs also determine what we mean by learning and what kinds of learning outcomes we want our learners to achieve, we should be aware that we must teach what we believe in.

Theoretical background

Teachers' beliefs systems have been the source of a great deal of investigation in the last decades. Richards and Lockhart (1994) have defined them as "the culture of teaching" meaning that these systems are founded on goals, values, and beliefs teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching and that these beliefs and values serve as the background to much of the teachers' decision making and action.

Many researchers have argued that our teachers' beliefs have a decisive role in the teaching-learning process. Williams and Burden (1997) claim that teachers are highly influenced by their beliefs, which in turn are closely linked to their values, to their views of the world and to their conceptions of their place within it. Following the same line of thought, Pajares (1992) in a comprehensive study concludes that teachers' beliefs had a greater influence than teachers' knowledge on the way they planned their lessons, on the kinds of decisions

they made, and on their general classroom practice. Beliefs were also found to be far more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals organize and define tasks and problems, and they were better predictors of how teachers behaved in the classroom.

Williams and Burden (1997) also add that beliefs are difficult to define and evaluate and that they tend to be culturally bound, to be formed early in life, and to be resistant to change. Furthermore, beliefs about teaching appear to be well established by the time a student gets to college (Weinstein, 1989). According to Agyris and Schön (1974) beliefs are difficult to measure; therefore, we usually have to infer people's beliefs from the ways in which they behave rather than what they say they believe in.

Teachers' beliefs about what learning is will affect everything that they do in the classroom, whether these beliefs are implicit or explicit. Williams and Burden (1997) argue that even if a teacher acts spontaneously, or from habit without thinking about the action, such actions are nevertheless prompted by a deep-rooted belief that may never have been articulated or made explicit. Thus teachers' deep-rooted beliefs about how languages are learned will pervade their classroom

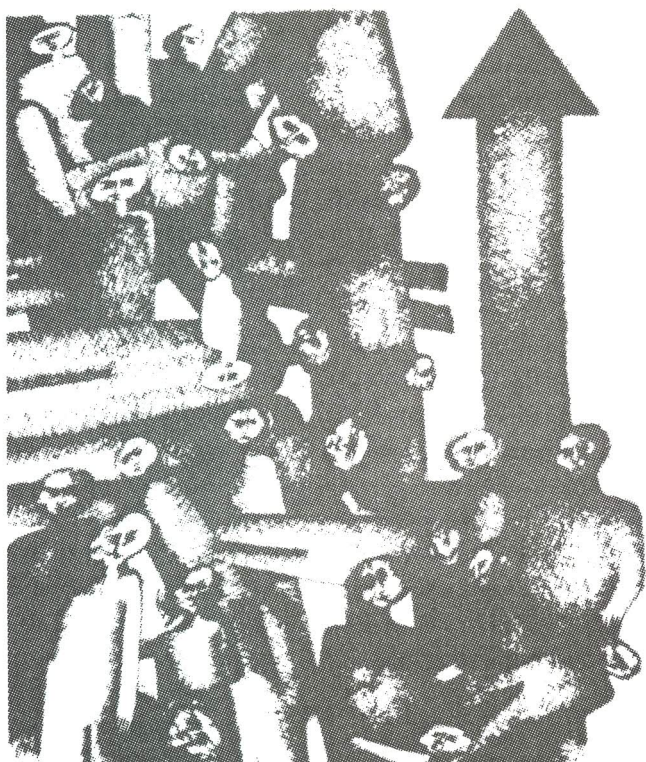
actions more than a particular methodology they are told to adopt or the coursebook they have to follow.

Teachers' beliefs are also reflected in the role that the teacher performs in the class (classroom control) and in the degree of initiative of the students. According to Stevick (1980), traditionally our society and our students have claimed that the teacher is the center of the stage in language instruction, but we now know that the learner is also central in the learning process. Thus, to reconcile both roles, he suggests a balance between control and initiative. He believes that "the teacher can keep nearly 100 percent of the 'control' while at the same time the learner is exercising nearly 100 percent of the 'initiative'." He defines control as consisting of "two essential elements: the structuring of classroom activities and making it easy for the learners to know how what they have done or said compares with what an established speaker would have said or done." Stevick (1980) also claims that "control" is clearly a teacher function, at least in the early part of any course.

In regard to initiative, Stevick (1980) states that initiative refers to decisions about who says what to whom and when, and that these decisions are provided by whoever is exercising control. In his opinion, control on the part of the teacher does not interfere with initiative on the part of the student because when the teacher tightens his or her control, he or she does not cut into students' initiative. Quite the opposite, the initiative of the students may be reduced by little or no control by the teacher.

Stevick's claims about control are supported by Biao (1996). Biao argues that it is precisely the teacher's direct control of the classroom activities what guarantees the full play of the students' potentials and initiatives. He also states that "without the conscious effort of self-control on the part of the teacher, an ideal classroom atmosphere for learning can hardly be created."

Considering that teachers' beliefs influence all classroom behavior, this article pretends to answer the following questions: What are the teacher's beliefs in relation to the method used? Is there a correlation between her beliefs and her class behavior? What are the most effective language learning activities according to the students? What do the students think about the method used and the pace of their learning? Is the



students' initiative reflected in their behavior? How does the teacher control the class?

Context for the course

The study was carried out in an English class for first-year French majors at the University of Costa Rica. The instructor, an experienced teacher, was observed for six weeks. Each class session was held twice a week, and it was three hours long. The main emphasis of the course was oral communication, but reading and writing were also integrated in most of the activities. The group, whose age range was from 17 to 50, consisted of 5 males and 18 females.

Data collection

The data were collected through observation of the class, an interview with the teacher (See Appendix A for questionnaire), informal conversations with the students (notes written down by the observer before, during, and after class), and a questionnaire given to the students (Appendix B).

Results and analysis

From observation and an interview with the teacher, it was determined that the teacher has the following beliefs:

- The fastest way to learn English is through Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) if supplemented with grammar explanations and drills. (The following principles underlie CLT: Learners learn a language through authentic and meaningful communication; this type of communication should be the goal of classroom activities; communication involves the integration of different skills, and learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error). (Richards and Rodgers, 2002).
- Students do not become accurate if grammar exercises are not provided by the teacher.
- A great deal of repetition is necessary before having the students produce new structures.
- Listening activities are basic to develop speaking skills. Thus listening and speaking should be integrated in the activities.
- The use of Spanish is sometimes necessary, especially when giving grammatical explanations to beginners.
- The teacher should facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts.
- Integration of all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) is necessary in the learning process.
- A pleasant classroom atmosphere is a must in an English class.
- Group work (3 or 4 students) is essential for communicative activities.
- The best students should help the slowest ones when working in groups.
- Slow students feel more confident when working in small groups and speak more than when working with the whole class.
- Phonetic symbols are not necessary with beginners. It is better to use a "practical" alphabet (sounds similar to learners' language).
- Students' errors should be corrected immediately in student-student and teacher-student interactions; however, errors should not be corrected when students are doing fluency activities.
- Everyday homework helps students reinforce new structures and vocabulary.
- Workbook exercises are necessary to practice new structures and vocabulary in written form.
- Extra readings help students learn more vocabulary and structures.
- Games help learners acquire new vocabulary and practice grammar structures.
- The teacher should not control the class when CLT is being used.
- In order to learn English, students should be responsible and punctual. Besides, they should participate actively in class every day.
- It is important to teach cultural aspects in our classes to help learners really master the language.

In regard to students' beliefs about the activities which help them learn English most efficiently, ten responses were analyzed. In the researcher's opinion these ten responses were the most pertinent ones. Table 1 presents these results.

Table 1
Students' beliefs about the degree in which activities help them learn English

0= no help at all 1= a little 2= somewhat 3 = a great deal

N=23				
TYPE OF ACTIVITY	0	1	2	3
Grammar explanations	1	1	3	18
Listening exercises	2	0	4	17
Reading tasks	8	1	3	11
Games	2	1	10	10
Repetition of structures	5	0	8	10
Pair work	6	0	8	9
Textbook exercises	8	1	5	9
Group work	5	2	8	8
Homework	5	1	9	8
Workbook exercises	8	2	7	6

The results in Table 1 suggest that over 78% of the students in this group believe that grammar explanations very helpful in their learning process. Similarly, 73% of the learners think that listening exercises greatly contribute to their learning of the language. Almost half of the students (47%) reported that reading tasks were helpful, and 43% of them considered that games and repetition of structures helped them learn the language. A smaller number of learners (less than 40%) think that textbook and workbook exercises, pair and group work, and homework helped them a great deal.

The students were also asked an open-ended question to find out if they felt that they were learning fast or slowly. Their answers are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Students' responses as to the pace of learning English

N = 23	
PACE	RESPONSES
Fast	8
Slow	10
Normal	5

Table 2 shows that 43% of the students think that the pace of the course is somewhat slow. 34% of the learners consider they are learning English fast in this course, and only 21% of them believe that the pace is appropriate for them.

The students were also asked about what method to learn English they considered the best. Their responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Students' responses as to the best method to learn English

N = 23	
THE BEST METHOD TO LEARN ENGLISH	RESPONSES
The one our teacher is using	13
Practice with native speakers	3
Through grammar explanations	3
Through conversation	2
Through videos	2

The results in Table 3 show that 56% of the students are probably happy with the method their teacher is using, and they possibly think that it is an effective method to learn English. Only two students (8%) think that the best way to learn English is through videos or conversations.

The results in Tables 1, 2 and 3 indicate that the teacher's beliefs about the approach she is using (CLT) match her students' beliefs. Both parts, the teacher and the students, believe that CLT is an effective approach. In regards to grammar and listening exercises, their beliefs somewhat match too. The teacher claims that the best way to learn English is CLT if supplemented with grammar explanations and exercises, and 18 students believe that grammar exercises contribute greatly to their learning. Seventeen students reported that listening exercises also help them learn English, and the teacher believes that listening is basic to develop speaking skills, which is the main objective of the course. However, not all the students seem to agree with their teacher regarding the usefulness of extra readings, games, and repetition of structures.

Table 4 summarizes those beliefs shared by the students and the teacher.

Table 4
Beliefs shared by the students and the teacher

MATCHING BELIEFS	
TEACHER'S	STUDENTS'
Grammar exercises help students become accurate.	Grammar exercises help us learn English.
Listening activities help students develop their speaking	Listening exercises help us learn English.
The communicative syllabus helps students learn	The method our teacher uses is a good method to learn English.
There should be immediate correction of mistakes.	We need immediate correction of our mistakes.
Games contribute greatly to learning grammar and vocabulary.	Games somewhat help us learn vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Table 5 shows the teacher's beliefs which are different from the students'.



Table 5
Teacher's beliefs and students's beliefs which differ

BELIEFS THAT DO NOT MATCH	
TEACHER'S	STUDENTS'
Group work is essential for communication activities.	Group work is a little help in learning English.
Homework helps students acquire vocabulary and structures.	Homework does not help us learn English.
Extra readings help students in their learning process.	50% of the students think that readings help them learn English.
Students learn English fast because of the method used.	Only 8 students think that they are learning English fast.
Repetition is very necessary before having the students produce the structures.	Less than 50% of the students think that repetition is important to learn English.
Workbook exercises are necessary to practice writing.	Workbook exercises do not help us learn English.
Conversations are very important in the communicative syllabus.	Conversations are not the best way to learn English.

Discussion

As far as method concerns, the teacher reported that she believes in teaching communicative competence; for this reason, she uses CLT. This approach permits her to provide a lot of opportunities for the students to learn and a lot of communicative activities for the students to acquire the target language. However, in the observations it was evident that she uses a communicative syllabus plus a grammar component. She frequently has grammar drills and very often she explicitly teaches grammar points with the

aid of the board. Besides, the teacher believes in drilling structures before having the students produce them; this is a characteristic of the Audiolingual method. (Richards and Rodgers, 2002). This fact was not mentioned during the interview probably because the teacher thinks that she is only using CLT. Possibly, if she had been asked if she was using some audiolingual procedures, her answer would have been negative.

From informal conversations with the students before class sessions and from students' comments at the end of some classes such as "Esta clase se me va volando" (Time flies when I'm in this class), "Me encanta esta clase" (I really like this class), and "¿Ya se terminó la clase? Pero, ¿qué hora es?" (Is the class over? What time is it?), we can deduce that students enjoy the class very much. However, it is rather interesting that the students report that they like the method used by the teacher, CLT, but most of them do not report that conversations are helpful in learning English, and one of the goals of this approach is meaningful communication. The results show that only two students believe in conversations as a means of learning English. Thus, there is mismatch between what students report in regard to the best method and the role of conversations in learning English.

The teacher also believes that since she uses CLT, she does not exercise control of the class. This is a very clear example that sometimes we say that we believe in something, but what we do in the classroom is something else. From classroom observation, it was also noticed that this teacher does control the class if we understand "control" as described by Stevick (1980): "the structuring of classroom activities and making it easy for the learners to know how what they have done or said compares with what an established speaker would have said or done." In spite of the fact that this teacher believes that "a teacher should not control the class when CLT is being used," she clearly controls the class because she does planning, structures the activities and decides when to start and to finish each task. Her control of the class was reflected in her decision of having a great variety of activities integrating different skills every day. For example, after listening to a passage, the students were given a set of questions to write a paragraph similar to the passage they had just heard. Everything was carefully prepared: the examples to explain grammatical problems, the activities, the

materials, and the instructions for the students. The teacher organized and controlled the class in a firm but friendly way.

The students' initiative was reflected in their behavior. Even though the teacher controlled the class, they had room for initiative. For example, they had to struggle to communicate at the same time that they were acquiring the target linguistic system in most of the activities that they had to do. Moreover, the students had to share information with their classmates when they did group work; for instance, in one of the communicative tasks assigned, they had to compare sets of pictures and find similarities and/or differences; in another one, they had to work out a likely sequence of events in a set of pictures. The students were also asked to solve problems in groups of 4 and to give and follow instructions. In all these activities, students showed their initiative by negotiating meaning, by being active participants, and by actively interacting with other students and with the teacher. Besides, the students engaged in social interaction activities having conversations, dialogues, role plays, and improvisations. At least once a week, the students had to improvise dialogues in front of the class. If students had questions about any of the grammatical structures, the teacher would clarify them before assigning situations for the students to produce similar dialogues to the model presented. While doing the practice, the teacher corrected the students to help them acquire not only comprehensible pronunciation but also accuracy and fluency. During the observation sessions, there was a salient aspect: the teacher always strived for mastery of content.

Conclusions and teaching implications

- If teachers want to improve their teaching styles, they must be aware of their beliefs about their own theoretical perspectives before making any changes in the teaching-learning process.
- Teachers should constantly re-evaluate, in the light of new knowledge, their beliefs about language and about how language is learned.
- Teachers' actions should be consistent with their beliefs; this seems to be an important aspect of effective teaching.
- It is important to clarify to learners the teacher's assumptions which underlie all classroom

practices in order to avoid misunderstandings and mistrust on the part of the students.

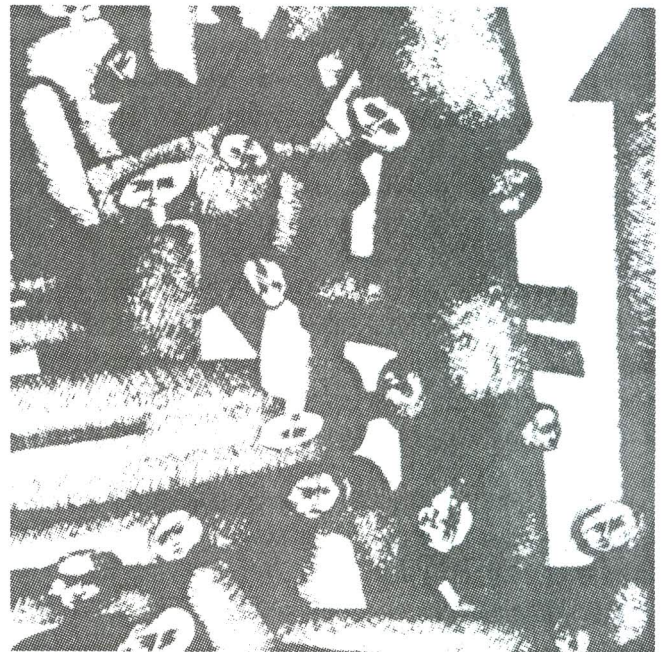
- Teachers' beliefs are difficult to change, but if we keep up to date and do research, these beliefs can be modified to enrich the students' learning process.
- Teachers should never teach anything that goes against their beliefs and values. This may cause distress and frustration on both parts, the teachers' and the students'.
- Teachers should be aware that their beliefs play a decisive role in the learning process and that they may have a positive or negative influence on the students.
- The teacher should try to have a friendly classroom atmosphere if she / he wants to have more control of the class and if she / he is aiming at helping the students learn faster and more efficiently.

A final thought on this experience

Observing the culture of a classroom could be a very enriching experience. First, since teachers' beliefs play a prominent role in shaping classroom decisions, this type of observation can help teachers make better decisions in their own classes in regards to teaching methods and useful activities. Second, classroom observation is very likely to produce a positive change in our beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching in a language class and more specifically, in the assumptions which underlie our teaching practices. Finally, the most valuable insight from doing this observation is that I learned, and now I firmly believe, that every day reflection and classroom research should be a must in our teaching experience. If we are really concerned with improving our teaching style and being updated, then we must get involved into classroom investigation and reflective teaching and share the results with other people in the field so that most people can benefit from this action, including our learners, who are in the end the most important participants in this teaching/learning process.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agyris and Schön. 1974. In Williams, M. & R. L. Burden. 1997. *Psychology for Language Teachers: a Social Constructivist Approach*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Biao, Z. 1996. "Misconceptions: Clarifying the Concept of Control." *English Teaching Forum*. Vol. 34, N° 3-4.
- Pajares. 1992. In Williams, M. & R. L. Burden. 1997. *Psychology for Language Teachers: a Social Constructivist Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. and C. Lockhart. 1994. *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. and T. Rodgers. 2002. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stevick, E. 1980. *Teaching Languages: A way and ways*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Williams, M. & R. L. Burden. 1997. *Psychology for Language Teachers: a Social Constructivist Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE USED DURING THE TEACHER'S INTERVIEW

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. What method do you use in your class? | 13. Why do you have games in your class? |
| 2. Why do you use this method? | 14. Why do you have group work? |
| 3. What skills do you teach? | 15. Do you teach grammar in your class? How do you do it? |
| 4. Do you believe in integrating the four skills? | 16. Do you believe it is useful to teach pronunciation at this level? |
| 5. Is there a skill which you consider more important than others? | 17. Do you use phonetic symbols? Why or why not? |
| 6. Do you correct all mistakes made by the students? | 18. Do you think your students like the atmosphere of the classroom? How do you know? |
| 7. How do you correct mistakes? | 19. What is your role in the class? |
| 8. In your opinion, what are the most important activities that you carry out? | 20. What is the role of your students? |
| 9. How do these activities contribute to the learning process? | 21. How would you describe your students' attitude toward learning English? |
| 10. Do you teach reading comprehension strategies? | 22. What kind of evaluation do you have in your class? |
| 11. Do you teach listening comprehension strategies? | 23. Do your students like this kind of evaluation? |
| 12. Do you teach cultural aspects in your class? Why or why not? | |

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE GIVEN TO STUDENTS

Datos del alumno

Edad _____ Masc. _____ Fem. _____

Carrera que sigue: _____ Colegio de procedencia: _____

¿Por qué lleva este curso? _____

¿Cuáles actividades de las que se hacen en clase cree usted que le ayudan más a aprender inglés? Marque con una X. Entre paréntesis escriba el grado en que se da esa condición, según la siguiente escala:

0: nada 1: poco 2: bastante 3: mucho

- ___ trabajos en grupo ()
- ___ explicaciones gramaticales de la profesora ()
- ___ repetición de palabras o frases ()
- ___ diálogos memorizados ()
- ___ ejercicios del libro de trabajo ()
- ___ trabajos en parejas ()
- ___ ejercicios de comprensión auditiva (Listening) ()
- ___ ejercicios del libro de texto ()
- ___ escritura de diálogos ()
- ___ juegos ()
- ___ actividades después de ver un vídeo ()
- ___ tareas ()
- ___ actividades con tarjetas o fotos ()
- ___ ejercicios de pronunciación ()
- ___ lecturas ()
- ___ canciones ()

¿Cree usted que está aprendiendo inglés lentamente o rápidamente? ¿Por qué? _____

En su opinión, ¿cuál sería el mejor método para aprender inglés? ¿Por qué? _____